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ABSTRACT

This theme issue describes Maryetta School, a rural pre-K-8 school in Stilwell, Oklahoma, with an enrollment of approximately 500 students, mostly American Indians of Cherokee descent. Although the area has a high poverty rate and virtually all the students are judged to be at risk, the school has an impressive array of programs and facilities and has won numerous awards, including National School of Excellence in 1988. This case study report traces the school's development, particularly since the early 1980s, and identifies leadership strategies that have promoted school improvement. Since 1968, the school has been under the leadership of a visionary "superintendent" (the title given to heads of dependent schools, which send students to another district for high school). The superintendent's beliefs that physical activity promotes academic learning and that right-brain learning styles are prevalent among Indian children led to the development of a "psychomotor program" that uses physical activities to reinforce cognitive skills and retention. This program and others have been funded through aggressive grantsmanship. The superintendent is the driving force for change and has several leadership strategies for effecting change and steady improvement. These include securing grants, determining and implementing the community's priorities, organizing special events that include the community, providing community education programs and other services, and planning for the long term and managing money wisely. The superintendent also hires strong, supportive staff with a variety of complementary skills, maintains good working relationships with them in a collegial atmosphere, and encourages new ideas. (SV)

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ISSUES . . . about Change

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Issues . . . about Change

Maryetta School: The Center of a Rural Community

Amidst the rolling hills of northeastern Oklahoma near the Arkansas border, Maryetta School is a pre-K–8 school that boasts an unusual number and variety of facilities. In the morning, parents and other members of the community are welcome to enjoy an "early bird" swim in the Junior Olympic-size indoor swimming pool, jog around the nature trail behind the school, or drop their toddlers off at the preschool. After school, parents may involve themselves as either instructors or participants in the school's community education program, which offers classes, crafts, water aerobics, and other activities. Little League baseball and basketball, as well as the swimming pool and nature trail, also attract crowds after school. On certain days of the week, the family literacy program, initiated in the 1994–95 school year, engages children in educational or cultural activities while their parents develop language or computer skills in the lab across the hall. Once a month, students, staff, and parents organize a community party around a specific theme. From time to time they also stage other events, to which nearby schools and community organizations are invited.

Instruction during the school day is grounded in the firm belief that every child can learn if the teaching style matches the child's learning style. Older students learn how to forecast the weather in science class, and some produce and broadcast a television show, including the weather forecast, every day over the school's own cable channel. Younger students might be featured in the show, participating in a special class activity. A darkroom makes it possible to teach students both the art and chemistry involved in developing photographs. Cameras and camcorders are used both to reinforce learning and to promote artistic expression. Poetry, pantomime, and puppetry are other avenues for artistic expression.

In the psychomotor center the youngest students are actively engaged in learning to count while jumping rope. Here students learn their numbers, colors, letters of the alphabet, and other words, while shapes and colors on the carpet, exercise equipment, and manipulatives all provide visual and kinesthetic reinforcement for the language and numerical concepts they are learning. Students also learn mathematics and science in a nearby kitchen by cooking or baking; the food they make serves as both incentive and reward for their work. Of all the programs and facilities at Maryetta, the superintendent is most proud of the psychomotor center.

In general, the variety of activities before, during, and after school is designed to make learning both active and fun. In 1988 Maryetta was one of 283 schools recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as National Schools of Excellence (now called Blue Ribbon Schools). That same year the school received the James Madison Elementary School Award for outstanding curriculum, an honor shared with only six other schools in the nation. In a statewide academic competition during the 1991–92 school year, the school placed first in mathematics and 17th overall.

The School District and Community

Although Maryetta sounds like a typical school in a wealthy district, it is actually a rural school in Stilwell, Oklahoma. Farming, especially strawberries, and the dairy and poultry industries are prominent in the area, and Maryetta's superintendent and some of his staff maintain farms or ranches. Stilwell is located in the state's poorest county, said to have the largest population of Cherokees in the nation. American Indian students, as well as educators, are concentrated in the northeastern quadrant of Oklahoma, the state with the highest number of Native Americans, according to the 1990 Census. The tribal complex of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the second-largest tribe within the boundaries of the U.S., is located in Tahlequah, a larger town about 25 miles west of Stilwell, as is the point at which the Trail of Tears, the forced journey of Indian tribes from the eastern United States to Oklahoma in the early 1800s, ended.

In September 1992, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) selected Maryetta School for a case study of leadership and school

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improvement. Out of a total of 512 students in the 1994–95 school year, 75 percent participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program, and 82 percent were American Indian; 66 percent of the staff were American Indian as well (mostly of Cherokee descent). According to school staff, virtually all of the students are at risk.

Maryetta School is a "dependent school," which is Oklahoma's term for a school whose graduates move on to another district to attend high school. Oklahoma has 118 dependent schools and 432 K–12 independent districts. The head of a dependent school holds the title of superintendent rather than that of principal, and the board has three members. The hallmark of Maryetta's board is its stability; one person served on the board for more than 30 years! The current board president, Larry Eagleton, has been on the board for 22 years. Like his father before him, he attended Maryetta School, and his children went to school at Maryetta as well. School staff are unanimously positive about the board, complimenting its members for their stability, focus on students, and positive, "can do" attitude.

Under the leadership of Carthel Means, a visionary superintendent who took over in 1968, Maryetta School has overcome many of the problems that tend to plague rural schools: a lack of resources, high staff turnover, and low student performance. In 1992 SEDL began tracing the development of the school, particularly since the early 1980s, and identified several leadership strategies that helped to make Maryetta what it is today. These strategies, which other school leaders may find enlightening, are best understood within the context of long-term school change at Maryetta.

History of School Change

Maryetta School began as a two-room schoolhouse, established shortly after the turn of the century and before Oklahoma became the 46th state in 1907. After statehood, the school was moved to its present site and renamed. The wood-frame school was replaced in 1939 by a WPA (Work Projects Administration) building, which itself was torn down in 1976. Campus facilities have been expanded or remodeled numerous times since about 1957.

Superintendent Carthel Means began his teaching career in 1953 in a one-room school with 28 students in eight grades; by necessity he learned the value of peer coaching and heterogeneous grouping. He worked in a nearby school district from 1963 until 1968, when that district was consolidated with Maryetta. At that time Maryetta had just four teachers. Facilities that have been added since Means assumed leadership of the consolidated district in 1968 include the gymnasium, the photography darkroom, the preschool, the psychomotor center, the swimming pool, tennis courts, and, most recently, the nature trail. Classrooms have also been added at different times, including a new wing of six classrooms constructed for the 1994–95 school year. With old facilities remodeled to accommodate new functions and new facilities attached to the original stone building, the school has obviously evolved in a gradual, patchwork fashion.

In addition to teaching, Means coached various athletic teams, with considerable success. From coaching, he developed an interest in the value of physical activity to reinforce cognitive skills and retention. To teach how the planets rotate in our solar system, for example, he assigned each student the role of a different planet, with one student standing in the center like the sun. After rotating around the "sun" in dynamic relationship to each other, the students could associate the different planets with the children who role-played those planets. Thus, the activity reinforced retention of the concepts learned. Many of the school's facilities reflect Means's coaching background and his belief that physical activity promotes academic learning.

Theory of Learning

Means purports to be one of the first educators to recognize the learning styles of American Indian students. Early in his tenure, the superintendent distinguished between left-brain and right-brain learning styles, theorizing that the right-brain style was more common among Indian children. In other words, verbal instructional methods were not as effective with these children as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic modalities were. Thus, he envisioned a psychomotor program that would reinforce language concepts through visual and auditory cues, as well as body movement. With a sizable grant received in the early 1980s, the superintendent and four other educators collaborated to develop such a program. An old cafeteria was remodeled to become the psychomotor center in 1980.

Like Means, Maryetta's teachers believe that right-brain learning styles are common among Indian children. They emphasize the importance of adapting instruction to different learning styles, and the many facilities and programs make it easier to cater to each student's particular style. A variety of equipment is now available, including manipulatives for the psychomotor center, puppets, the darkroom, a mathematics/computer lab, a

computer in every classroom, and Cherokee literature in the library. There is even a kitchen, mentioned earlier, and a music room with a piano, ten or more keyboards, earphones, and other music paraphernalia. The only need for additional equipment that was identified by staff concerned automation and networking capabilities for the library.

Staff unanimously articulate a clear focus on students. "We focus on the individual child" is the shared purpose voiced repeatedly in one way or another at the school. In the words of one teacher, "Everything we do is focused on making these students more successful in school and in life." Staff stress the importance of fostering self-esteem and promoting pride in one's culture or heritage. Some teachers, teacher assistants, and students are bilingual, able to speak both Cherokee and English. Cultural enrichment focuses on the Cherokee culture. First graders, for example, learn to create clay pots, say a chant in Cherokee while jumping rope, and play Cherokee games. In the psychomotor center, students learn to say numbers, colors, letters of the alphabet, and other words in both English and Cherokee, so that all students have a chance to shine regardless of which language is more natural for them.

Maryetta's students, stated one teacher, respond well to this kind of bilingual, bicultural approach to instruction. To illustrate, she talked about a kindergarten student who did not speak English well when he first came to the school. Even though he actively resisted school, the teacher was able to get acquainted with him. The boy excelled at the daily opening exercises, which always included the Cherokee color words, and the teacher's assistant, who spoke both Cherokee and English, worked with him on counting and other skills. She also created a new bilingual display on the bulletin board every month. Gradually this bilingual approach "really blossomed him out." Other approaches, including summer school enrichment, a Foster Grandparent or "Granny" program in which older women tutor up to three children one-on-one, and an after-school youth tutoring program, all help to individualize instruction.

Although staff consider their students at risk, the vast majority of the staff have positive attitudes about the students. "We want our kids to achieve their full potential" and "We want to do our best for the children" were typical of the attitudes expressed about students. One group of siblings, remarked one teacher, were having difficulty at home but "doing wonderfully at school." Generally teachers seem confident that they can work well with their pupils, citing examples of their success with students who were initially difficult.

But a broader shared purpose of Maryetta School is to serve the community as well. Having grown up in the area, Means and many staff well understand the community and its needs. They believe the school should be a community center, offering resources not otherwise available in this poor, rural area. "Adult classes are really good for this community," one person remarked. For this reason, classes, tutoring, and facilities are all available both to students and to members of the community. "Parents are involved with the school at all times," said one teacher. "At 10:00 p.m. you will find community members at the school." Joy Hall, one of the program directors, asserts that being the center of the community facilitates school improvement. Thus, staff believe that serving the community ultimately benefits the school as well.

Leadership Strategies

The superintendent appears to be the driving force for change. He has several leadership strategies for effecting change, involving the community in school affairs, and accomplishing steady improvement:

1. Securing and managing grants to supplement the school's limited general revenue fund
2. Obtaining input through surveys and committees to determine the community's priorities
3. Following through to implement the community's ideas
4. Organizing special events to which the community is invited
5. Providing community education programs and other services to the community
6. Planning for the long term and managing money wisely for future initiatives.

Grantsmanship

The most striking leadership strategy at Maryetta is the impressive use of grants to supplement the school district's tax base, which is small because of the poverty and amount of non-taxable land in the local area. This strategy appears to have taken hold during the quest to develop the psychomotor program. Three initial grant applications to develop the program were denied. The Cherokee Nation offered the school a grant of $40,000, but Means did not accept it, on the grounds that it was not enough for the psychomotor program he envisioned. Encouraged by the four educators with whom he collaborated, Means finally won a sizable grant in 1981 through Title VII, a federal funding source. Under the

grant, the school developed the psychomotor program in three phases: (1) grades K–3, (2) grades 4–6, and (3) grades 7–8. The curriculum guides developed for the program then are still in use today.

After just one year, the test scores for grades K–3 improved dramatically not only in language but also in mathematics. The improvement in mathematics surprised staff, because they had not targeted mathematics during the first phase of the program. Because test scores showed that the program worked best with the younger students, the psychomotor center is now used for children from preschool through the second grade.

Since competing successfully for the Title VII grant for the psychomotor center, staff have become proficient at securing other Title VII grants on a regular basis. They later obtained a Title VII bilingual grant for language development through creative writing, and they still use the curriculum guide they completed in 1986–87 under that grant (they have since developed a second curriculum guide on the same topic). A "hands-on" mathematics and science program was funded through Title VII beginning in the 1991–92 school year. And during the 1994–95 school year, Maryetta was the only school in the country that received *three* Title VII grants.

The language development program is now funded by Title V (recently renamed Title IX), a program of formula grants available from the Office of Indian Education, U.S. Department of Education. Maryetta also uses federal funds from the Johnson O'Malley (JOM) program, administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs through contracts with public schools and other entities like Maryetta that serve Native American students. The JOM parent committee initiated a youth tutoring program in the 1992–93 school year, after committee members attended a workshop where they heard about another school using youth as tutors. To fund the program, the school applied for and received a noncompetitive JOM grant, and preference was given in the hiring process to tutors who were Native American. Three out of four children receiving tutoring are Native American as well.

Two administrators are employed to manage the grant programs, although they also have other duties. The school subscribes to the *Federal Register* so that these administrators can keep abreast of the latest funding opportunities. They pursue new grants continuously, although they realize that only one out of about four or five may be funded. For the 1992–93 school year, for example, Maryetta submitted a proposal for a Title V parent involvement program for preschoolers in which books, computers, and other resources were to be loaned out to the parents. Since the request for proposals stipulated that the parents had to pay for services received, the parents were to "pay" with their volunteer time. Unfortunately, the proposal was not funded. Also for lack of funding, pre-school was discontinued for three-year-olds, although it is still maintained for four-year-olds.

When a proposal is not funded, staff seek feedback to understand why, and they keep the proposal on file in case it becomes useful in the future. A year after the proposal for the parent involvement program was denied as a Title V grant, staff revised it and submitted it again, not to Title V but rather to Title VII. This time Maryetta won the grant, and the program commenced in the 1993–94 school year.

In addition to various federal grants, Maryetta has also obtained grants from the state, a local university, a nonprofit corporation, and the Cherokee Nation. One competitive grant from the state supports a program called Oklahoma Parents as Teachers. OPAT is designed to maximize children's overall development during the first three years of life by helping parents be more effective in their role as the children's first teachers. First funded in the 1993–94 school year and continued thereafter on a year-by-year basis, OPAT offers workshops for parents at school while on-site child care is provided. The program coordinator also conducts home visits to provide individualized assistance to parents with children 0–3 years old. Another program first funded in the 1993–94 school year was Great Expectations, which is based on an approach used successfully with inner-city youth in Chicago by educator Dr. Marva Collins. Although the teaching techniques in this program are traditional, with much repetition and memorization, classroom protocol and recitations put unusual emphasis on treating children with respect, fostering high self-esteem, and instilling a sense of personal choice and responsibility for the direction their lives will take. Maryetta is one of several schools in the area that participate in this program, which is supported by a private foundation but administered by a nearby university.

Staff are so proficient at obtaining grants that the proportion of the school's general fund that comes from federal sources is 20 percent, compared to 4 percent for a similar district and a statewide average of just 7 percent (Oklahoma Office of Accountability, December 1994). As a result, the school has numerous programs and facilities that it could not otherwise afford. Means is

proud of the fact that he has never proposed a bond package, which might impose a hardship on this poor community. The only bond issue ever voted for Maryetta was for $15,000 in 1957; it was paid off in 1967, a year before Means took over as superintendent.

Schools wanting to improve their ability to obtain grants for new programs or facilities might keep in mind several points. First, a school must monitor the availability of grants by reviewing sources of information, like the *Federal Register*, that announce requests for proposals and grant opportunities from private and government agencies at the national, state, or local levels. Second, a school may wish to concentrate on developing its familiarity with the procedures and requirements of one particular funding source. For Maryetta, that source was Title VII because of its emphasis on language development. Third, a school should expect to develop its skills in grantsmanship over time. While it is easy to get discouraged when a proposal is not selected for funding, the school must view it as an investment, seek feedback to learn from the experience, and then persevere by preparing subsequent applications.

Input Through Surveys and Committees

Although the superintendent is the driving force for change, input is key to the decision-making process. Many changes have been made to the school in response to input from staff, students, parents, and the community. Staff report that the school has surveys "all the time," and many of the programs and facilities were developed "because of a survey." The preschool, for example, was designed for working parents and for children who need it to better prepare them for first grade. In one particular needs assessment that is conducted every year, staff, parents, and upper-grade students (5th through 8th grade) receive a list of possible programs or facilities that the school could develop, and they are asked to rank them according to what they want the school to pursue. The results are presented to the board, and then staff follow through on the board's decisions. For example, the school instituted a program called Transitional First (T1) for children who were not ready for first grade for a variety of reasons, such as being born late in the year. The school developed "T1" because a survey indicated that parents viewed the program as a high priority. Although no longer officially offering T1, the school has maintained the program's basic approach of tailoring first-grade instruction to students' developmental needs by offering different first-grade programs.

Students in the upper grades receive not only the annual needs assessment but also various *ad hoc* surveys, which may be used to determine the topics for workshops or classes or to guide the development of grant proposals. Students, stressed one staff member, love to do surveys. Because many students expressed an interest in photography, Maryetta set aside space for a darkroom and supplied it with all the equipment needed to develop photographs. While most of the surveys seek the input of staff, students, and parents, a few are designed for former students and other members of the community. Community members also have an opportunity to submit suggestions at the annual open house and other special activities. Many of the school's programs and facilities were developed because staff, students, and the community gave them high priority.

Much is accomplished through committees: committees for the federally funded programs, a staff development committee, and an *ad hoc* committee for each special event, like the Kids' Safety Fair and the Harvest Carnival. One faculty member commented that he was put on a committee soon after he came to this school, in contrast to his previous school, where he "hadn't been on a committee in 15 years." Parents have the opportunity through a survey to volunteer for several committees, and the Johnson O'Malley Committee is exclusively parents. To hire new staff, a fairly even mix of administrators, teachers, and parents comprise an employment screening committee, which narrows the selection down to three; the superintendent and the board select from the three applicants to make the final choice. Parents and business representatives have served on the curriculum committee, and one example of a committee that involved former students was the discipline committee.

Many schools understand the importance of input and shared decision making, and advisory committees often include a few parents or community members. Schools might wish to conduct surveys more frequently, however, so that staff come to view them as a vehicle for change, as they have at Maryetta. Depending on the question that a survey is designed to address, a school may wish to seek the perspectives of not only staff and parents but also students, former students, and certain sectors of the community. Like Maryetta, some schools must keep in mind that surveys are not necessarily appropriate for obtaining input from those whose proficiency in English is limited. Community education programs and community use of school facilities, however, naturally generate opportunities for informal input and dialogue about school matters.

Follow-Through

When staff talk about the surveys, they stress the importance of follow-through. Transitional First, the

preschool, the darkroom, and the swimming pool are just a few of many examples of the cycle of input and follow-through in the history of change at Maryetta. One of the earliest examples was the baseball diamond, while one of the most recent examples was the computer lab. Because the school has followed through over the years on the results of its surveys, people have confidence that the information from the surveys really is used in planning future improvements for the school. Over time, the people of the school have witnessed changes to the school that reflect their input; many take credit for suggesting the ideas that the school has implemented.

During the course of this case study, SEDL observed several examples of follow-through. For example, the superintendent heard about Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) from a nearby school district in October 1992 during one of SEDL's site visits. He planned to "get on it right away" and immediately collaborated with the highway patrol to train an officer to provide the program. By February 1993 when SEDL next visited Maryetta, a local patrolman had been certified in the program, and D.A.R.E. sessions had begun for the kindergarten, third, and fifth grades. The officer has presented D.A.R.E. to students in these grades twice a week ever since.

Modifications to the school facilities that were on the "drawing board" when SEDL staff visited Maryetta would be completed by the time SEDL conducted its next site visit. On one particular visit, for example, Means mentioned that he wanted to build a new wing with offices and a board room; the next time SEDL staff visited Maryetta, the wing had become reality, and Means briefly mentioned plans for a new wing of classrooms. On a subsequent visit, these new classrooms, too, were in full use, and Means was planning a family literacy center. Four months later, Maryetta had a fully-functioning family literacy center when SEDL visited Maryetta again.

If a school contemplates conducting a survey or obtaining input by other means, its resolve to follow through on the results must be strong from the beginning. There is little point in obtaining input by any means if the results are allowed to fall by the wayside because of pressing demands that arise later. For this reason, the school should have a follow-through plan and then stick to it.

Special Events

The fourth leadership strategy is to conduct special events that are open to other schools and the community. The annual Kids' Safety Fair, for example, is attended by students and staff from several nearby schools. Booths at the fair provide information on dental hygiene, snakebites, how to use 911, and other topics, while policemen and firefighters stage several mock rescue operations. Even a helicopter flies in from a hospital in Tulsa. The school holds a monthly community party, usually with a theme—such as "50s Night," which occurred during the 1992–93 school year. These parties attract not only students and parents but also their relatives and friends. Ticket sales at the Harvest Carnival on Halloween and balloon sales on Valentine's Day are Maryetta's biggest fund-raisers, but dinners and tournaments also bring in added revenue.

A Heritage Club was established in the 1991–92 school year. In grades 3–8, students elect the Heritage Club's chief and vice-chief, who must be Indian. The Heritage Club organizes cultural events, such as the JOM talent show and cultural awareness days. Other events are the Thanksgiving Dinner, 4-H Rally, Health Fair, and Science Fair, all of which are held annually. Track meets, ball games, a karate exhibition, and other athletic activities are other ways that the school involves the community. Use of the school's facilities is high, partly because such resources are not available anywhere else in the community, which is one of the reasons that Maryetta strives to be a community center.

Many schools have special events, just not as frequently as Maryetta. For a school to organize so many social or educational activities, it is helpful to have a couple of people—staff or volunteers—who excel at organizing and managing all the details associated with these events. Students can help, too, as can outside agencies; Maryetta involves as many as 15–20 agencies in the Kids' Safety Fair. In general, special events draw attention to the needs of the school, help build a sense of community, and foster pride in the school.

Services to the Community

The fifth leadership strategy for involving the community is to provide services to the community. Maryetta opens its facilities to the public early and late in the day and offers a variety of community education programs. Certain parents have the key to the building, and there are no fences to keep people out—although a fence around the preschool safely keeps the small children in. Many people take advantage of the school's swimming pool, nature trail, computer lab, and other facilities. In the 1994–95 school year, Maryetta began allowing parents to check out computers a week at a time and

opened up a family literacy center. Computer classes, crafts, water aerobics, life-guard training, self-defense classes, and Little League all draw the community to the school.

In collaboration with a foundation based in Tulsa, the school offers "arthritis swim," a class for people who suffer arthritis. The foundation, which proposed the idea to Maryetta partly because it had a swimming pool, trained an instructor at Maryetta to teach the class. The school has also collaborated with a nearby vocational school to provide classes.

Maryetta developed a curriculum on the prevention of child abuse and neglect after obtaining a competitive grant in 1986 from the Oklahoma Health Department. Although funding decreased each year thereafter, the school was able to hire a coordinator to develop the curriculum in collaboration with social workers at local service agencies and Northeastern State University in Tahlequah. A county task force was established, and training was provided for agencies, including a community college, throughout the county. Maryetta's coordinator, Joy Hall, went with staff from the local child protective services agency to every school in the county that accepted their offer to conduct two-hour workshops for the school on abuse and neglect issues. Each year this program, which requires a minimum of six seminars, focuses on a different but related topic, such as parent training. Maryetta was invited to highlight this program at three successive national conferences on child abuse and neglect.

Rural schools may be more interested in Maryetta's strategy of community service than schools in urban areas where services are more widely available from various agencies or organizations. A school may wish to start by opening its doors one evening a week so that people can use the building or facilities. Often grants are available to fund services to the community, but, if not, a school may be able to find parents or members of the community who are willing to serve as instructors, organize workshops, or volunteer their time in other ways that benefit the community. Social activities may be needed at first to build commitment to the expansion of the school's role in the community. On an ongoing basis, the school must have surveys or other mechanisms for determining which services are most needed or wanted and for soliciting assistance in providing these services.

Long-Range Planning and Money Management

According to Larry Eagleton, who has presided over the board of education for the last 12 years, the board gives the staff as much leeway as possible and assumes responsibility for determining how their ideas will be funded either in the immediate future or over the long term. Although Maryetta relies on moneys earmarked for Indian education, these funds are sometimes supplemented with money from other sources so that all students have the same opportunities. Every student, for example, may elect to receive free piano lessons, which are supported by a combination of Indian and non-Indian education funds. Similarly, breakfast and lunch programs are supplemented so that all students, not just those who are income-eligible, receive free meals.

The perfect example of Maryetta's successful strategic planning is the swimming pool. The annual survey to assess the community's priorities indicated repeatedly that the community wanted a swimming pool and swimming instruction. Since the area includes many rivers and lakes, the idea of a swimming pool had merit for safety as well as recreational reasons, but Maryetta could not afford one. Over a period of approximately five years, however, the board accumulated enough in the general revenue fund to finance the construction of the swimming pool.

Not surprisingly, the board uses federal and state funds as much as possible before drawing from the general revenue fund. It is imperative for school administrators to become intimately familiar with the restrictions that apply to each source of funds and to use restricted funds whenever possible so that more flexible funds are available for other purposes. In its own list of accomplishments, Maryetta claims to be the "first in our area" to have "an in-school bonded treasurer which allows for better management of funds." This underscores how important Means thinks it is to have someone in house—whether it be a bonded treasurer or not—who closely monitors the flow of funds in and out of the school and who plans for the future needs of the school.

Climate for Change

Grants, surveys, committee input, and the emphasis on follow-through have created a healthy climate for change at Maryetta. Staff expect the school to adjust to the changing needs of students and the community. In addition to surveys, the school uses test scores to determine where improvement is needed. As one person explained, "We give [the Iowa Test of Basic Skills] to the whole school, starting at kindergarten, because that helps us to know what we need to improve on."

Staff described Means variously as "motivated," "aggressive," "innovative," and "proactive." Program

Director Joy Hall stated, "He leads by example." According to many staff, most new ideas come from the superintendent, but if one of his staff proposes an idea to him, he usually encourages the person to try it. The idea for the Kids' Safety Fair, for example, came from Donna Hill, another program director, and gained the full support of Means. Although he encourages new ideas, he clearly expects to approve an idea before staff proceed to implement it. Other sources of new ideas include conferences and programs from other districts.

Many staff members feel encouraged to propose new ideas and try them out. When asked if things had been tried that were not successful, staff members typically answered "Not that I know of" or "I can't think of anything." A German class was about the only example that was mentioned. As one person explained, ideas that do not work out are simply dropped. There is virtually no negativity, yet certain people see room for growth and improvement. The surveys, committees, use of test scores, and frequent changes all indicate a climate of critical inquiry, and the school's ability to obtain grants enables it to follow up on new ideas.

Human Resources

The school attracts good staff because of its excellent reputation, and the salaries are among the highest in the county, so turnover is not a problem. People who speak the Cherokee language are available from the community, and Maryetta has hired some of them as teacher assistants to help meet the cultural needs of the students. In his role as a coach, the superintendent had already pulled people from the community to help with sports, so he naturally views the community as a resource for the school.

One staff member mentioned that the superintendent's record as a coach was excellent and that he applied his coaching skills to his administrative work. One of his talents appears to be the ability to perceive the strengths and weaknesses of people. Means thinks about people in terms of categories—like left-brain and right-brain or dominant and supportive—that complement each other. He has surrounded himself with people, including four former superintendents, who have a wide variety of experiences. He emphasizes hiring the right people, and he looks for individuals who have specific talents. He delegates responsibilities, then gives his staff free rein to do their work. It is clear to staff, however, that he expects them "to do their jobs." In interviews, the staff did not emphasize formal monitoring so much as this climate of expectations. Several teachers commented that people voluntarily pitch in or that "everyone is willing to do their share of extra duties."

Working Relationships

According to staff, the teachers at Maryetta work well together and enjoy the school's family atmosphere. It is interesting to note, however, that the school has no teachers' lounge. Staff congregate around the administrative offices or the school cafeteria, where they eat breakfast together. Unlike many other schools, there is plenty of space if members of the staff need a place to talk or meet informally.

The superintendent is reportedly an "easy man to talk to" and "a good listener," and he "helps you in every way that he can." According to some staff, he has an "open door policy," and teachers feel comfortable talking to him at his office, in the school cafeteria, or elsewhere, not only about ideas but also about problems. Means assigns areas of responsibility to staff members and then gives them autonomy in their work.

Since the 1992–93 school year, monthly administrative meetings have been open to more staff, and the time of the meetings has been staggered so that staff can attend at least some of the meetings regardless of when they have their conference periods. As of the 1994–95 school year, the school stays in session longer Monday through Thursday but dismisses students early on Friday, so that teachers have more time to plan for the following week.

Staff conveyed an eagerness to learn from each other. One teacher, for example, mentioned two other teachers whom she enjoyed watching. "I love to watch him teach," she said about one of them. "He teaches . . . and he motivates them and I love it. He gets them excited." She went on to say that "over the years you build up [new skills] and then when new teachers come they borrow from you and it's wonderful." A first-year teacher is assigned a consultant teacher who introduces the new teacher to the school and its rules and explains how the school system works.

Staff expressed positive feelings about their colleagues, about the leaders of the school, and about the community. The community, in turn, expressed tremendous confidence and pride in the school. "The most important thing in this community is Maryetta School," wrote one parent on a questionnaire. "Parents and community members in general," wrote another, "have the highest regard for the school and feel it is a super school." The long tenure of the superintendent, low turnover of staff, and long-term stability of the school board have facilitated school improvement. Another positive factor is the

superintendent's good relationships with high-level officials at the state department of education, the Cherokee Nation, and elsewhere. Means serves on a few advisory committees for these organizations.

Special Skills

The superintendent has considerable skill in construction and other "contractor" work, which appears to facilitate change. For example, other schools must hire a manager to oversee land acquisition, remodeling, new construction, or equipment installation, but at Maryetta Means does much of this himself. Whereas other schools might shy away from undertaking complex projects such as installing a television studio, he has confidence that he will successfully accomplish the task. The board president, who is an electrician by trade and a farmer, also helps with this type of work.

External Factors that Facilitate or Impede Improvement

Maryetta has succeeded in turning the poverty of the area and its high American Indian population to its advantage by obtaining many grants that would not have been available to other schools. While vision and a quest for continual improvement drive change at the school, grants constitute the school's primary means of supporting the programs and facilities that realize that vision.

Other factors external to the school act to facilitate or impede improvement as well. Some staff express positive feelings about the state's focus on learner-based outcomes and its limits on class size in elementary schools. On the other hand, the staff also cited a few state or federal policies as barriers to improvement. One of these was a state regulation that capital outlay moneys could not come from the general fund. This restriction put pressure on districts to obtain such moneys from their communities through bonds, but the superintendent deliberately avoids issuing bonds because of the poverty in the community. Other state regulations, the format for teacher evaluations, and the extent of paperwork and documentation were also cited as impediments.

When asked to identify factors that impede school improvement, the board president mentioned two: First, state mandates that are imposed on the school with no provision of state funds to meet the cost of implementing those mandates. Second, Maryetta is the envy of the community in this impoverished and rural area. Although Maryetta invites the community to use its facilities before and after school and to attend its special events, a few nearby schools refuse these opportunities, perhaps because of jealousy or resentment. The board has attempted to foster collaboration between Maryetta and another local school with some success—between both schools' mathematics programs, for example. But the board would like to see more collaboration. Even more important, school leaders encounter opposition from certain factions of the community when they try to expand the grade levels to include high school. When Maryetta's board voted in favor of adding the 9th grade in the 1994–95 school year, intense political pressure on legislators resulted in a law that prevented the school from expanding, even though other factions of the community were in favor of it.

Summary

A school with a high population of at-risk students must have a vision of how at-risk students learn. Staff describe their students repeatedly as right-brain or visual learners, and Maryetta has accumulated resources designed to teach students with various learning styles. Among the many facilities and programs, the psychomotor center best illustrates three of the school's guiding principles: (1) instruction must be individualized to the student's particular learning style, (2) learning should be active and fun, and (3) physical activity enhances academic learning and retention. Another guiding principle is that the school should offer the same opportunities to all students, even though many funding sources target only those students who meet certain criteria. The school gives older students the responsibility of producing a television show every day and the opportunity to develop photographs in a darkroom. The after-school tutoring program gives older students from the local high school, including Maryetta graduates, the responsibility of tutoring younger students while providing more individualized attention to those younger students than would otherwise be possible.

Successful leadership strategies include the impressive use of grants to secure resources; community involvement through surveys and committees; special events; community education programs and other services to the community; and long-range strategic planning and excellent money management. Staff regard the superintendent as a visionary leader who is the primary source of ideas for school improvement. Means assigns staff members their areas of responsibility and gives them autonomy in their work. His "open door policy" encourages staff to discuss ideas and problems with him.

Although he gives staff the freedom to do their work, he clearly expects them to work hard and to seek his approval before trying something new. He has fostered a collegial, "family" atmosphere in which staff work well together, learn from each other, voluntarily take on extra duties, and constantly try new things to make the school even better.

Three factors appear to account for Maryetta's enthusiasm for new ideas. First, staff interact a great deal with the community, getting many of their ideas from community members. Means also gets ideas from other educators throughout the state and elsewhere. Second, Maryetta is receptive to new ideas and excellent at following through with them. Third, the school's resources attract interest from other organizations that want to collaborate with Maryetta.

The superintendent believes that the psychomotor program is the main reason the school was recognized as a National School of Excellence in 1988. In addition to the awards won by the school, Means himself has won numerous leadership awards, including the Cherokee Nation Award for Leadership in Indian Education. He was inducted into the Oklahoma Educators Hall of Fame in 1991 by the state association of Phi Delta Kappa and received a Leadership Award and Citation of Merit from his alma mater, Northeastern State University in Oklahoma.

On one of SEDL's site visits to Maryetta, Means shared his thoughts on leadership in a handwritten note:

> *Good leaders are visionary. They look further over the hill into the future, establish goals based on that farsightedness, and move backward from it to help create the future. They are not afraid to dream, imagine, and take risks. They add depth and breadth to their vision by articulating a clear sense of direction.*
>
> *A leader imagines possible achievements by conceptualizing a specific future, sees each part's relationship to the whole organization, and most important, sees the relationship of the organization to the environment.*
>
> *A leader needs the capacity to provide the emotional glue that binds leaders to followers.*
>
> — Carthel Means, February 3, 1993

Addendum

This case study report primarily reflects data gathered by SEDL staff during site visits to the school that began in September 1992. These visits had two purposes: to gather baseline data, such as background and demographic information about the school, district, and community, and to conduct formal interviews and make observations about the school's past and present improvement efforts, significant aspects of the school, and the school's leadership. Data gathered through telephone interviews supplemented the report. Interviews were conducted with administrators, teachers, teacher assistants, and one board member. Other sources of data included school documents and forms that SEDL asked school staff to complete. Some direct quotes are included in the report to convey the "tone" of the comments that the staff members made during interviews.

We wish to express our appreciation to the entire staff at Maryetta for their cooperation with this case study. We hope that other schools will learn from Maryetta's leadership and remarkable achievements.

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